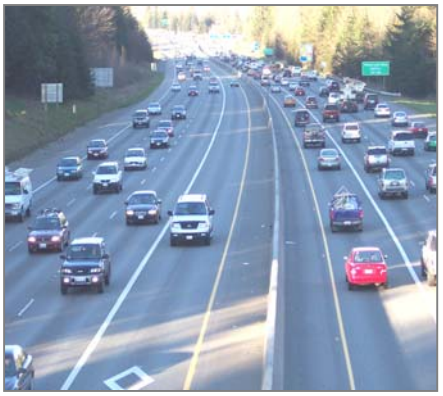
# CHAPTER 2

# Why do we need this project?

Our region needs the Bellevue Nickel Improvement Project to improve traffic flow and freight mobility in ways that are safe and reliable. Users of I-405 in Bellevue know that traffic congestion in the area has worsened. The section of I-405 between I-90 and Southeast 8th Street is one of the busiest sections of the I-405 corridor. On an average morning, northbound commuters and other travelers experience heavy congestion for as long as 3 hours between 6:00 and 9:00 a.m. Likewise, on a typical afternoon, southbound commuters can expect to experience heavy traffic beginning as early as 3:00 p.m. and lasting for several hours into the evening.



**Traffic on I-405**

Our project is one component of the I-405 Master Plan, which addresses congestion along the entire I-405 corridor.

## What is the I-405 Corridor Program and how does it relate to our project?

The I-405 Corridor Program is a comprehensive strategy to reduce congestion and improve mobility throughout the I-405 corridor. The I-405 corridor begins at the Interstate 5 (I-5) interchange in the City of Tukwila and extends northward 30 miles to the I-5 interchange in Lynnwood. The purpose of the I-405 Corridor Program is to:

- Ensure I-405 continues to function as an efficient transportation facility.
- Maintain or enhance livable communities within the I-405 corridor.
- Maintain or improve air quality, protect or enhance nearby streams and wetlands, and promote regional environmental values such as continued integrity of the natural environment.
- Support a vigorous regional and state economy by responding to existing and future travel needs.
- Accommodate planned regional growth.

As part of the overall I-405 Corridor Program, the Bellevue Nickel Improvement Project will improve access and mobility on

**What is congestion?**

Congestion occurs when vehicles on the freeway move at an average speed of 45 miles per hour or less and the flow of traffic is often stop and go.


**I-405 at the northbound Southeast 8th Street exit**

**What is a Record of Decision?**

A record of decision is a public document that explains the environmental decisions that were made, and summarizes any mitigation measures included in the project.

the section of roadway between I-90 and Southeast 8th Street in Bellevue.

## What is the background of the Bellevue Nickel Improvement Project?

In 1998, WSDOT joined with the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), the Federal Transit Administration (FTA), Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority (Sound Transit), King County, and local governments in an effort to reduce traffic congestion and improve mobility in the I-405 corridor.

In 2002, WSDOT published an environmental impact statement (EIS) that evaluated a broad range of transportation improvement alternatives for the entire I-405 corridor from Tukwila to Lynnwood. That process led to the selection of an alternative that has become the I-405 Corridor Program Master Plan. As part of this program, the Bellevue Nickel Improvement Project includes specific highway improvements for the section of I-405 between I-90 and Southeast 8th Street in Bellevue.

The Record of Decision (ROD) selected a project alternative that would widen I-405 by as many as two lanes in each direction throughout its 30-mile length. The design for the selected alternative includes areas separating general-purpose lanes from parallel HOV lanes (potentially used by future high-capacity transit).

In 2003, the Washington State legislature approved a statewide transportation-funding plan called the “nickel package.” The nickel package provides funding for congestion relief projects in three critical traffic hotspots along the I-405 Corridor: Renton, Bellevue, and Kirkland. The Bellevue Nickel Improvement Project is one of several projects now moving forward as part of a phased implementation of the I-405 Corridor Program. Exhibit 1-1 shows the location of the Bellevue Nickel Improvement Project.

In keeping with the direction established in the Final EIS (FEIS) and ROD, we are preparing a National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) environmental analysis (EA) that focuses on project-level effects of constructing and operating the Bellevue Nickel Improvement Project.

We based the EA on the analysis in the *I-405 Corridor Program Final EIS* and described any new or additional project changes, information, effects, or mitigation measures not identified and analyzed in the corridor-level FEIS. The project-level EA for

the Bellevue Nickel Improvement Project does not re-examine the corridor-level alternatives, effects, and mitigation measures presented in the corridor-level FEIS, or the decisions described in the ROD.

## Does the region's transportation planning process include the Bellevue Nickel Improvement Project?

Improvements along I-405, including the Bellevue Nickel Improvement Project, are included in WSDOT's *Highway System Plan* (WSDOT 2004a). The *Highway System Plan* forecasts transportation needs for the next 20 years.

In addition, the Metropolitan Transportation Plan for the Central Puget Sound region, *Destination 2030* (Puget Sound Clean Air Agency 2001), defines the transportation action plan for the Puget Sound region over the next 30 years. The Bellevue Nickel Improvement Project appears in that plan as a key project needed to maintain and improve regional mobility. The project is also consistent with the transportation plans and policies of the City of Bellevue.

## What happens if we do not build the Bellevue Nickel Improvement Project?

If we do not build the project, a projected increase in traffic would result in even higher levels of congestion. Travel speeds and vehicle throughput would fall.

In 2002, the section of I-405 between I-90 and Southeast 8th Street carried 210,000 vehicles per weekday (the total for both directions). By the year 2014, our transportation model predicts 218,000 vehicles will travel this stretch of roadway each day even in the absence of improvements. The additional daily traffic load of 8,000 vehicles would create additional delays and congestion.

**Throughput**

The number of vehicles carried on a facility. This is usually measured at a specific point on the roadway facility for a predetermined period of time.